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Occasional Rambles in the World of the Book

by **Richard Abel** <kstrauch@comcast.net>



When I first started to get my feet wet, in the mid-1940s, in the world of the book, other than as a voracious reader, that world was composed of a small coterie of writers, most with little of merit to contribute, and a diminutive contingent of dedicated literary authors and a circumscribed number of writers dealing with serious, specialized matters; relatively small publishers who mingled their house's chief editorial and marketing burdens with that of managing the firm; a handful of local booksellers, the largest of whom were located in the major centers of population and in which the owner was the leading buyer and salesman; and libraries struggling in depression/wartime time to keep collections adequate to user's demands, all fueled by a tiny fraction of the total population of the United States, who thought the book a needed element of life. Learning of and obtaining a book useful to the servings of a particular reader's interests was, not uncommonly, an undertaking of surmounting a sometimes-daunting logjam of difficulties, save in the case of mass-popular fiction.

By way of illustration I grew up partly in Great Falls, Montana and partly on a cattle ranch some sixty miles distant. My interests soon branched out to history, philosophy, political science, and related matters. Living on the ranch I could often not return borrowed library books within stipulated time-frames and what was more important, I soon discovered that I needed most of the books I read in my personal library for subsequent references and cross-references. There was one small bookstore and one small book department in a department store in Great Falls to serve my needs. Neither ever had anything I was seeking nor could the staff give me much help in discovering titles which might serve my ill-informed, ongoing learning needs—and indeed were little interested in so doing for they were preoccupied with nurturing the conceit of being au courant with the contemporary literary scene and they had always to special order to fill my requests, when special ordering of serious books was a genuinely difficult procedure. Full of hope, I tried the first of the book clubs to very little greater success. There was the “green pig” (CBI), a valuable reference tool for librarians and booksellers, but it ill-served the novice autodidact as a bibliographic guide to likely sources for further study. In short, it was a tough go to be a neophyte, heavy-duty reader of substantial books in that time.

But back to the principle thread of this reflection: This small world was animated by a handful of names to conjure with: The most-senior generation of the **Scribner**, and **Wiley** families; the brash newcomers including **Liveright**, **Knopf**, and **Cerf**; the knowledgeable refugee publishers who radically reshaped English language scientific publishing, **Johnson/Jacobi**, **Dekker/Proskauer**, etc.; the several managers of the **Scribner's** retail shop, **Schwartz**, and **Kroch** among others; and all aware of the ever-present stern, gray eminence of the **Melcher** family at **Bowker**. All were

solid bookmen, conscious of and dedicated to the profound cultural importance and role of the book. Most, publishers and booksellers alike established a textbook venture with varying degrees of success. None were afraid of hard work in either their workplace or the larger cultural world shaped by the book. All were still more or less possessed of the cultural missionizing zeal then yet endemic to those drawn over the centuries to the world of the book. Above all they were all the personal, visible embodiment of their firms and the presence that informed and fueled the central vitality of their enterprises. This was still almost the world of the personal book trade.

By the 1950s, no longer an entirely green tenderfoot in the trade, I watched from my perch at the **Reed College Bookstore** the coming and rapid evolution of the concentration of the trade by conglomerates of various origins and motivations. As is well known it all started with **Knopf's** resolute and epochal march up the street to offer his firm to **Cerf**. **Knopf** had somewhat earlier taken in the **Pantheon** house founded by the **Wolff's** and the elder **Schiffman** when they encountered rough financial waters. So two of the foremost entrepreneurial houses of the time were folded into a third entrepreneurial, **Random House**. Not long after the **Knopf/Random House** amalgamation **Cerf** and associates took up a purchase offer by **RCA** which wildly exceeded any previous trove of treasure offered for a publishing firm. Now the hunt was in full throat, first by the media giants, then by other business sectors. The trans-Atlantic mergers increasingly larger and financially more sophisticated publishing entities were a constant counterpoint to the repeated disposal of book-publishing entities were a constant counterpoint to the repeated disposal of book-publishing houses by various other sector conglomerates, presuming to find some kind of “synergy” with the low-margin, erratic market which is the book-trade. So today a small handful of trade, textbook, reference, and sci-tech conglomerates control much of English-language publishing. In close parallel the bookselling sector was involved in a rapid restructuring leading to retail market control by about five, internationally oriented firms, one a pure Internet operation. This story of concentration occurring within a time span of about one generation need not detain this account further because most **ATG** readers are familiar with it, at least in broad outline.

While all this consolidation was preoccupying the headline writers a quite remarkable renewal was going forward outside the glare of mass-popular purview. In the course of this rapid and radical concentration a number of highly competent editorial people were terminated, some from long-held positions. Other highly qualified editors saw the handwriting on the wall and resigned their positions — often positions of considerable importance. Further, a number of entrepreneurial types with keen and intellectually well-honed bookish objectives

found it increasingly difficult to break into this shrinking world. Yet others in closely related fields of endeavor, distressed by the editorial and inventory practices of the conglomerates, strongly considered remedying the situation. A number of this disparate group migrated into setting up their own small, publishing house. And a cadre of independent booksellers demonstrated their acuity by not simply surviving but growing in the face of the tidal wave of chain stores. These vigorous booksellers are also marked by a hands-on owner-manager-buyer-salesman.

Out of all this ferment of the last twenty-or-so years have emerged a substantial number of small publishers devoted to publishing specifically in all manner of subject fields. They have brought a wealth of specialized knowledge and understanding to their diverse publishing programs. The long heritage of scholar publishers/booksellers — a continuing characteristic of the world of the book for so long as we have any evidence — remained intact in another of the age-old characteristics of the world of books in a large number of small, specialized, niche publishers. (Let me make clear at this point that I speak not of the “little press,” a hobby enterprise of coterie publishing, forever dependent upon subsidies.) A tiny handful of examples of such publishers include **Irving Horowitz** of **Transaction** with an astonishing list of social science titles, the **Peters** of **A.K. Peters** with a list of mathematics and computer science books of the highest caliber, **Lawrence Erlbaum** of his eponymous firm with a stellar behavioral science list, **Robert Fleck** of **Oak Knoll** with the finest list of books about, and a substantial number of university presses...

And precisely as in the old mold the new, serious, niche publishers have also become expert marketers reaching out to their particular audiences by employing a variety of ingenious marketing tools. (**Gutenberg's** successors originated the catalog as a marketing tool as well as the travel guides and itineraries for the growing body of late medieval bourgeoisie traders.) The contemporary niche publishers reach out to their audiences via direct mail, via specialist, and other independent booksellers via Internet, via attendance at conventions, etc. attended particularly by their readers, via non-bookselling retail outlets, via associations formed by those interested in their specialized subject content, and via other novel and unconventional channels. And let it be quickly added that most of the niche publishers do so not simply out of concern for continuing economic viability but out of the ethical imperative of getting the thinking and propositions of their authors out to as high percentage of the authors' intended audience as reasonably possible. In

continued on page 85

Something To Think About? — Winter Musings

Column Editor: **Mary E. (Tinker) Massey** (Serials Librarian, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Jack R. Hunt Library)
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It's winter again and I always recap what's happened for the year and try to get a feel for the projects we will be doing. Having a new job with new responsibilities makes me grin, but it causes me to think seriously too. In January, I will be learning all about the Reference Desk and how we give such fine service to our patrons. This will be the first time it will be a vital part of my job, comprising four hours a week. What a great way for a Serials Librarian to learn the ways people search for things and how we can catalog better for those needs, as well as purchase materials with knowledge of the research being done on campus. I am just completing the beginning Aeronautical Sciences course and find myself wishing it would not end. Attendance in this course is designed to give us a chance to learn vocabulary and specialized principles of flight, as well as possible areas of research, so we can understand the questions that are brought to the Reference Desk. Did I mention that I am also completing the required interviews with each staff member? For fifteen minutes, a colleague tells me what his/her job is and how they accomplish it. I have found this helpful in learning who will be helping me in the future, or what people I can tap for specific skills. It also gives me a chance to hear a little about them personally and how much they value their work here at Embry-Riddle.

As for the summer, we are looking forward to a weeding project in the Periodical stacks. Perhaps some of you have experienced this process, but it is new to me in many ways. We will be looking at ways to retain access to the

journal issues while cleaning physical issues off the shelves. There will be much perusal of circulation records for usage, searching microfilm/fiche provider lists for specific volumes at reasonable prices, or perhaps free or inexpensive online access. This will be a very foreign process for me, as I tend to be a pack rat. I abhor the very thought of destroying reading materials, but the space is essential. We have a limited amount of room and there will be additional titles bought this year for the collection. We have a number of recreational magazines for the students and believe that we can easily provide microform replacements for those journals without jeopardizing the research aspects. Luckily, we have some new microfilm cabinets in an interesting archway construction, as well as some new fiche cabinets being procured with gift monies. I thought it might be fun to research how one develops this process and follows through with restricted funds, since we all face this task from time to time. Where would you weed? What criteria would you establish to help clean the shelves? Would you contact faculty for their recommendations? Involved with this project is a Periodicals Holdings List (print), which we edit twice a year, in January and September. Just thinking about the many changes makes my head spin. We will be discussing and exploring the many possibilities in this project. Would be interested in hearing from you on the subject.

Did you ever think about how many projects we create and complete in the library? How many are created by our physical environment? How many are from technological changes? How many are from crises? I think it is interesting to sit back and think about all the ways we create work for ourselves, or are directed by external causes. Try making some lists of these activities and categorize them. Look at the patterns. Are we problem creators, problem solvers, or both? What percentage of time do you spend on these activities?



By the way, what's happening with claims? They seem to be running away from us. What's so difficult about actually getting issues you pay for? Do vendors just make lists and charge money, then become mute? We have a bunch of active reps trying to find out why publishers just don't send things when they are paid. Sure puts a crimp on our ability to provide access to those titles. We try to track claims every two weeks to stay on top, because I am tired of getting notices that we have waited too long to claim. What's too long? Sometimes I feel we need to claim before they are published so we have a 50-50 chance of receiving them. Just kidding, but it does get frustrating! Hmmm? Do online full text sources use this frustration to snatch us from the print world? Are we being manipulated? I hate the thought. I don't remember this much confusion with the old one on one, get it from the source subscription style. Well, it's something to think about anyway.

My other task to complete in January is the Collection Development list for serials. We have a request for new material, the OCLC record, Ulrich's indexing and review information, and a sample issue clumped together in a folder, so that all the librarians can evaluate the material and vote on its worthiness. We route the folders to everyone, then wait for the return package and totaling of the votes. Our patrons eagerly await the results. This year we are looking at a number of good aviation titles, as well as some on terrorism, hearing, engineering physics and a few leisure titles. Should be an interesting and exciting time.

We acquire new materials, make them accessible to patrons, help them find any of the materials they need and then we weed. A year in review, but not without the preservation we do everyday in cleaning, repairing and binding. We are preparing binding at this moment since the classes will be ending in a week. Nothing like seeing paper things in a new dress or binding with clear lettering. It's like starting new again. Have a great year and look forward to your many tasks. They can be new and adventuresome when you see them in a different light. Try it! 🍷

Occasional Rambles ...

from page 84

this act of stimulating the public square they are immensely assisted by the robust local booksellers possessed of not simply the aim of economic survival but serving readers as fully as possible.

This ethical concern extends to the management of inventories as well. The niche publishers have for centuries endeavored to keep their lists in print as long as possible, now a much more readily achieved objective with the introduction of affordable print-on-demand technology. The serious booksellers also seek to make as wide an inventory available to readers as possible.

Out of concentration has arisen a revived version of the classic book-person.

Mirabile dictu, to this book-trade old hand the world of the book remains firmly embedded in the centuries old mold of the scholar-publisher, the erudite bookseller, and the learned librarian, all masters serving the traditional intellectual and ethical cultural exercise of advancing the evolving search for truth and goodness. 🍷

Back Talk

from page 86

search engine. Therefore, I suggest we simply stop trying and instead make sure that our students are the most accomplished Google clients on the planet. Next let's understand what Google can't offer: current eBooks; books that never go electronic; current e-journal articles; e-journals that never go open access; local content that cannot be shared with the world; paperbacks that are easily read in bed/at the beach/in the bathtub, and whatever else your patrons want but can't get freely/easily on the Web. And

then focus on making these available and KNOWN by our user community. These are my New Year's wishes and resolutions. 🍷

Endnotes

1. See "Bush Authorized Domestic Spying: Post-9/11 Order Bypassed Special Court" by Dan Eggen, *Washington Post* Staff Writer. Friday, December 16, 2005; Page A01.
2. See *South Coast Today*. <http://www.southcoasttoday.com/daily/12-05/12-17-05/a09lo650.htm>
3. *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* (2005). <http://www.oclc.org/reports/2005perceptions.htm>